

Comments on A. Anikst's *History of English Literature*

Zhang Longxi

History of English Literature. By A. Anikst, translated by Dai Liuling et al. People's Literature Press, Beijing, 1959; reprinted 1980. 646 pp.

The fact that many books on the history of English literature are written by non-English authors pays a tribute not only to the world-wide significance of English literature, but to the academic achievement of foreign scholars as well. There are quite a number of good works on this subject, especially by French literary historians: H. A. Taine in the nineteenth century, and J. J. Jusserand, E. Legouis and L. Cazamian in the twentieth. In China, however, we have not seen a significant work on this subject originally written in Chinese. But this lacuna may now be filled by the republication of the Chinese translation of a Russian book, *History of English Literature.* First published in the late fifties and reprinted in 1980, this translation remains the only book in the field in Chinese and so has a remarkable influence not only among general readers, but also on the teaching and study of English literature since it is considered an important reference book in universities. It is worthwhile, then, to investigate its value.

The Chinese version follows the Russian text published in Moscow in 1956, and so reflects the level of Soviet scholarship in the forties and fifties. As literary history, the book ought to first provide facts, and then outline the development of literature and its principles. Yet, upon opening the book, we find the author warning us in the Preface that "we must not limit ourselves to statements of fact, but should consider it necessary to give the fact a precise social evaluation." It is all very well to say so, but our primary concern is still the information of fact, precise and intact.

Even in presenting the mere "statements of fact" the book is not very reliable. A handy example is the author's anachronistic assertion that Rossetti "sang praise of his deceased wife" in *The Blessed Damozel*, a poem which is known to have been written ten years before the poet got married (See foot-

note p. 505 in the Chinese version). The book is even more questionable for its total suppression of some important facts of the history of English literature. In his discussion of eighteenth-century literature, the author says nothing about Samuel Johnson, and not a word about Jane Austen in the section on early nineteenth-century fiction. These are the two glaring examples that may raise a great deal of doubt about the quality of the book. Perhaps Dr. Johnson is not a writer to be ranked among the greatest, but he definitely exerted a great influence on his contemporaries and almost became the dictator of the literary taste of his time. His influence was so powerful that many literary historians call the latter half of the eighteenth century "the Age of Johnson," and regard his letter to Lord Chesterfield as the writer's declaration of independence from the tutelage of patrons. Jane Austen, the author of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, is a gifted novelist whose works introduce us to ordinary people in ordinary situations or what she described as "pictures of domestic life in country villages." Nevertheless, with the exquisite touch peculiar to a woman-writer, Austen depicted the life and psychology of the middle-class, and satirized narrow-mindedness, selfishness, folly and avarice with the technique known as comic irony. The author Anikst, ignores Jane Austen, but comments favorably on Walter Scott, saying that this romantic writer sometimes "gives profound realistic representation of the historical past." In fact, however, Scott was the first to appreciate the realistic style of Austen's works by comparing them with the masterpieces of the Flemish painters. He wrote in the October 1816 issue of *The Quarterly* that the subjects in Austen's works, though often not elegant and never grand, like those of the Flemish school of painting, "are finished up to nature; and with a precision which delights the reader." Most modern critics today would give Jane Austen the same credit as they give Sir Walter Scott and regard them as the most important English novelists of the early nineteenth century, but for some reason which is quite beyond us, Anikst is strangely tight-lipped about Dr. Johnson and Jane Austen as though the two figures had never existed in the history of English literature.

Similarly, more than twenty pages are devoted to a detailed account of the plot of John Galsworthy's novels, but not a single word is written about W. H. Auden or W. B. Yeats, and then James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence and T. S. Eliot are given no more than a few paragraphs where we find nothing really analytic except such labelling epithets as "reactionary," "decadent" or "nihilistic." Such a lopsided arrangement of historical data is an inevitable outcome of the author's "leftist" perspective in which "the progressive possibility of bourgeois development" is seen to have been "exhausted" by the latter half of the nineteenth century, consequently leaving nothing possible for the bourgeois writers of this century except the production of decadent and reactionary literature. Clearly such assertions do no justice to the real status of twentieth-century Western literature.

How about the "precise social evaluation" of facts which Anikst promised us in the Preface? Let us take one example. In the eighteenth century, the age of neo-classicism which placed experience and reason above everything else, the advancement of science and urban civilization brought about the sudden growth of prose, and even let prose influence contemporary poetry. As an explanation of this phenomenon Anikst says: "the predominance of prose over poetry in literature of the eighteenth century proves that the prosaic reality of bourgeois society could not offer fruitful material for the creation of poetic works." Yet, does Anikst want us to believe that in the nineteenth century, the time when romantic poetry flowered so splendidly, the reality of bourgeois English society suddenly became unprosaic? Such oversimplified judgment is evidently useless in explaining intricate phenomena like the high and low tides of poetry. The author has made many other equally arbitrary judgments and historically groundless and weak statements like the following: "*Paradise Lost* is to a considerable degree not an organic work"; Coleridge's poems "do not touch the reader's heart-strings"; "The Chartist Movement greatly influenced literature."

In his analysis of historical phenomena, Anikst often starts from preconceived ideas. This is exemplified by his criticism of nineteenth-century romantic literature. The author first puts forward a pair of concepts: "conservative (reactionary) romanticism" and "progressive (revolutionary) romanticism," dichotomizing the romantic poets into "two opposing camps," and then begins his one-sided presentation and criticism. According to Anikst, Byron is "the greatest representative of English romanticism," while Wordsworth's famous Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* becomes the "manifesto of reactionary romanticism in English literature." But the arguments are inadequate in both cases. With such preconceptions in mind, the author tries his best to praise Byron, but maintains a conspicuous silence about the misanthropic cynicism and pessimistic nihilism so apparent in some of Byron's works. On the other hand, Anikst depicts Wordsworth in colors of an advocate of "the patriarchal institutions of English peasantry," as if the poet aspired to retreat to the Middle Ages. However he ignores the fact that in a famous sonnet written in 1802, i.e. two years after the publication of what he calls the "manifesto of reactionary romanticism," Wordsworth was still apostrophizing John Milton, the great poet of English Revolution, urging him to "return to us again; and give us manners, virtue, freedom, power." Even later, when the poet recalled in the *Prelude* how he had felt the influence of the French Revolution in the prime of his youth, he was still full of enthusiasm. It is true that the ensuing dictatorship of the Jacobins and the Napoleonic War struck fear into this gentle poet who had sought for a milder reform, and made him turn away from his sympathetic stance after the agony of a spiritual crisis. This was, however, nothing uncommon among the intellectuals of his time, and the change indicates more of Wordsworth's fear of bloodshed and violence than of his be-

trayal of revolutionary ideals. As for the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, it is a protest against the depleted neo-classic style of eighteenth century poetry, and speaks for discarding the artificial and hackneyed poetic diction and for using the plain and fresh language to describe nature and rustic life. It defines poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity," and declares that "poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; . . . it is immortal as the heart of man." There might be some overstatements in Wordsworth's assertions, but his advocacy of a language of poetry which is "the language really spoken by men" shows at least one aspect of the rise of democratic ideas. It is therefore difficult to see why Anikst should call such a work "reactionary."

The question here is not that a certain writer has given an appropriate or inappropriate critical judgment, but that the methodology used, which splits literature into two opposing political camps of conservative and progressive, reactionary and revolutionary, has a counter-productive influence on the study of literature. Such vulgar sociological criticism subordinates literature to political judgments, regards a literary work as socio-historical document and can offer nothing but political labelling. Like other disciplines, literature has its special character and underlying principles, but it seems that more people are more likely to recognize the character and laws of physics and chemistry than those of literature. It is true that literature is closely related to politics, history and philosophy, but it is different from any one of them. The history of literature would lack a solid foundation if isolated from the context of political and social changes, but it would completely disappear or merge into a history of politics or social ideas if it were stripped of any discussion on the development of formal elements like language, imagery, and genre, etc. Of course, Anikst's *History of English Literature* is not without any value as a reference book, but it unfortunately relies upon politics as a measure for everything and, despite its claim to apply two criteria for evaluation — those of the people and of art — it contains very little analysis of the artistic value of literary works. There is no denying the fact that this tendency has existed for a long time, and its influence has been a primary cause for our backwardness in literary criticism. Many of our critics have copied the Soviet theory of the forties and fifties on literature and art, and accepted it without independent reflection, satisfying themselves by borrowing ready-made concepts, conclusions or a word or two from Marx or Lenin. This is not genuine criticism, but political certification. The correct way of applying Marxism in literary criticism entails employing the view and methodology of dialectical and historical materialism in the analysis of literary works, thinking independently and arriving at one's own conclusions, not quoting a few words from Marx or Lenin, let alone accepting another's version of Marxism. For a long time a kind of cobweb of ideology which traps us into stereotyped thinking has been woven from the interlinkings of the many incorrect or unscientific concepts that grow

out of the simplification and vulgarization of Marxism. It is now high time for us to break away from such cobwebs, and take new steps along our own way of Marxist criticism.

In sum, Anikst's book which is as nearly five hundred thousand words long has not much value as a reference work, and its poor influence should not be overlooked any longer, especially since it is to only one available. It is our belief that the Chinese public expects to have another history of English literature written by our own scholars with sufficient historical facts and valid, valuable criticism.

— Written in English

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